The relationship between the state and religious authority has been one of the character traits of political thought since early modern time. Hobbes, Locke, Spinoza, and Mendelssohn among others envisioned different relationships between state and church. Whether subordinating the church to the state (according to Hobbes and Spinoza), or separating their realms (according to Locke), or that the two could live in harmony and promote human happiness if their natures are correctly understood (according to Mendelssohn), the conflict between these two entities has remained universally prevalent.

Yet the conflict between the sacred—prophet, saint, and God's man—and the state secular authority embodied by the sovereign king, autocrat or democratic government is not only universal but an ancient one. The most famous example of such conflicts is the dispute between German King Heinrich IV, the Holy Roman Emperor, and Pope Gregory the VII over the latter’s insistence that it was his exclusive authority to appoint bishops and other clergymen, which King Heinrich rejected, insisting that it was the traditional prerogative of the King. Heinrich renounced Gregory as a pope, to which the latter responded by issuing a religious decree by which Heinrich was excommunicated and deposed, stating that, one year from that day, the excommunication would become permanent and irrevocable. The result was that within a short while King Heinrich was abandoned by other German princes and was forced to renege on his earlier position. In January 1077, in the midst of a harsh winter, he walked to Canossa, in today’s northern Italy, where the
Pope had found refuge out of fear from the King, to ask for forgiveness. Although a few months later this power struggle resumed and this time the King prevailed, forcing the Pope to flee from Rome and appointing another pope instead, the ‘walk to Canossa’ became an expression connoting an act of submission and humiliation until these days.

The tension between religion and state affairs has been salient in recent decades around the globe as a result of the revival of religiosity, mostly in the form of fundamentalist movements marked by militant action and modern strategies of propagation and political mobilization, most conspicuously the use of the media. The interference of the sacred in public life is manifest particularly in Islam and Judaism but also in Christianity. Whether in Muslim societies, Israel or the United States, the sacred value system is closely combined with, and employed to promote a political agenda. The need of Arab-Muslim secular leaders to often support their major decisions by Fatwa (a scholarly Islamic opinion) attests to the power of Islam as a source of political legitimacy in societies where religion is the ultimate value system defining political and social identity.

The clash between state and religion has come to the fore in Israel following the government's peace process with the Palestinians, culminating in the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 after a series of verbal statements of de-legitimization and excommunication made by national-religious rabbis. Since then the conflict has become even wider, represented by increasingly overt effort of national-religious rabbi to exploit their religious status to interfere in public affairs by issuing petitions and religious opinions, calling on IDF soldiers to disobey orders to evict settlers from Judea and Samaria, denying the government’s right to make decisions concerning removal of Jewish settlers from their homes in the West Bank or the Gaza Strip. The most recent example of such challenge of state authority on religious grounds is a
petition signed by rabbis calling Jews not to rent out any kind of housing to Israeli Arab citizens in Jewish towns and neighborhoods.

**The Case of Prophet Samuel and King Saul**

The Old Testament, whose greatness stems from its universality and ever-relevant moral lessons, tells us similar fascinating stories of this conflict between prophets, representing the heavenly moral power of religion, and kings, representing the mundane state power. The earliest case in biblical history of the People of Israel is the encounter between Prophet Samuel and King Saul.

The Bible tells us that when the Prophet Samuel grew very old and his sons sinned and failed to follow his way, the people of Israel gathered and demanded that Samuel appoint a king to rule them, "like all nations." Samuel found the request irritating and humiliating. Here he was the man of God, serving this thankless people for so long only to be finally replaced by a king. Samuel, however, had no choice but to appeal to the Lord and complain, rather than simply telling him about the people's request, which he perceived as an indication of mistrust and rebellion against him personally. Indeed, the Biblical author clearly identifies with the prophet, making the people wrong by portraying their request as even a greater sin than rejecting Samuel. We are told that the Lord accepted the people's request while at the same time was soothing Samuel's injured pride, indicating to the prophet that "It is not you but me whom the people have loathed," as they had always done ever since the exodus from Egypt. This way Samuel comes out both committed to appoint a king for the people of Israel by the word of God, but at the same time we are reminded how sinful the people was by nature. In short, this course of discussion postulates the prophet's righteousness and moral superiority over the people and their king-to-be.
Still, the Prophet kept trying to avoid the appointment of a king by intimidating the people, telling them how horrible the practices and norms of the king would be like: tyranny, enslavement of his subjects, including their sons and daughters, and expropriation of their property as he wished. But the people of Israel would not budge or listen to Samuel's warnings: "We must have a king like all other nations, who would rule us and fight our battles," they insisted.

Indeed, the Lord asked Samuel to meet the people's request and appoint a king to rule them. From this point on, all Samuel's actions in this regard would appear to be abiding by the word of God. Yet even the Biblical writer, whose loyalty to the spiritual leader is beyond doubt, could not entirely wipe out some doubts about Samuel's conduct that any impartial and insightful reader would conclude from reading the story.

At that particular time, just when Samuel was confronted by his people about the appointment of a king, an entirely different story had taken place: the asses of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin got lost so he sent his son Saul to look for them. All that the Bible tells us about the boy is that he was handsomer and taller than anyone of the people of Israel. His search for the asses led him to the seat of Samuel, who, according to the Bible, had been warned in advance by the Lord about the coming of young Saul. To legitimize future actions of Samuel, we are told that the Lord revealed to him that this was the man chosen for kingship.

Samuel ostensibly recognizes Saul and honors him by inviting him to his table to eat with him and other dignitaries, but reveals nothing about his intentions. Only later, when they were alone in the field, before sending Saul back home, the prophet took a flask of oil and poured on his head, revealing to him that "the Lord herewith anoints you ruler over His own people." This, however, was to remain a secret until further notice from Samuel.
Then, Saul is sent back home and given signs, which are supposed to convince him that he was to become another man with another heart because the Lord was now with him. But Samuel knows that he may have problems with the people of Israel over his choice. He must show them that it was the Lord's choice not his. Hence, he requested that Saul wait for him for seven days in a place called Gilgal, where Samuel was about to gather the people of Israel to attend the election of the king.

In what would resemble modern premeditated referendums in some developing countries under autocratic regimes, where presidents are elected by 99.9 percent of the votes, Samuel summons the people before the Lord by their tribes and clans. All this is meant to ostensibly elect a king, while in fact he had already been chosen by God and anointed by Samuel. Not unexpectedly, Samuel's lottery indicated the tribe of Benjamin, later; the clan of haMatri came up, and eventually, Saul son of Kish. But Saul was not found, probably because it would be an unusual for such a young boy to participate at a gathering of the sages and noble people. But somebody had obviously been aware of where he was hiding and as soon as he was found, Samuel presents him as the King-chosen. "Do you see the one whom the Lord has chosen?" asks Samuel, pointing to Saul’s handsomeness, "There is none like him among all the people," which was followed by the people's shouting, "Long live the King". Strangely enough, the king was chosen from the least of all tribes of Israel, Benjamin. He represented no leadership skill, courage, or experience other than that of a shepherd, and his only distinguishing character trait was his handsomeness--totally irrelevant for kingship.

Even Saul was astonished about his being chosen to kingship. After all, he wondered, he was a Benjaminite, the smallest of all Israel's tribes, and his clan was the least of all the clans in the
tribe. No doubt, Samuel had no intention to be easily shunned aside or replaced by any successor, least of all, by a secular authority embodied by a king. In fact, Samuel could not have chosen better to keep his grip and control over the "divinely elected" king.

Samuel's choice became an example of raising one from the lowest status of a shepherd to the eminent position of a king. Thus the proverb related to Saul as one who "looked for the asses and found a kingship," or, "was taken from behind the herd." Interestingly enough, Chapter 13, of the first book of Samuel opens with the words: "Saul was ... year old when he became a king," omitting any reference to Saul's age. Obviously, Saul was so young when enthroned that it was too embarrassing for the Biblical author to mention it preferring to leave his age ambiguously missed.

The road to kingship was, however, long and uneasy. Instead of immediately inaugurating him as a king, Saul was sent by Samuel back home as a shepherd. Whether or not was Samuel trying to postpone the inauguration and erode the people's insistence to have a king, he obviously could not delay it for a long time. After Saul had proven himself as a real leader, gathering the people of Israel and leading them in a successful battle against the Ammonites, he won the people's full support. Only then, Samuel agrees to establish a monarchy in Israel: "let's go to Gilgal and inaugurate the monarchy", whose rules would be written and recorded in a document by none but Samuel himself.

Samuel continued to function as the man at the helm, guiding and issuing orders to Saul--always in the name of the Lord--whom to fight, how and when. Yet when Saul failed to follow his exact orders, Samuel harshly rebukes him in front of the people: "you acted foolishly in not keeping the commandments that the Lord your God laid upon you!" The Bible clearly shows that it was Samuel's fault. It was he who failed to show up on time, which he himself had specified, leaving
Saul no choice but to begin the religious ritual that precedes the battle on his own or risk the disintegration of his military force. It was as if Samuel premeditated the scene in order to undermine the young king's reputation and authority, and when the latter did, he announced to Saul that his dynasty would not endure and that another man would be sought to succeed him.

That the battle itself ended in a triumph for Israel, made no difference to Samuel, who, in the next battle against the Amalekites, found Saul guilty of not obeying the Lord's precise commandment--delivered by Samuel--to exterminate not only the whole people of Amalek, but also their sheep and oxen. Thus, Samuel ends up saying to Saul: "Because you rejected the Lord's command, the Lord has rejected you as king over Israel." No wonder King Saul became haunted by the prophet's curse, which turned him bitter, moody, and paranoid. Indeed, for Samuel, Saul was just a pawn in the game of power with the disobedient people of Israel. Samuel's repeated rebukes of King Saul set the legal basis for choosing David as an alternative, God-chosen king-to-be, another young shepherd with conspicuous beauty and musical talent, though this time from the biggest tribe of Judah.

Even after Samuel passed away, the Bible tells us that his spirit continued to haunt and nightmare King Saul. The night before his last battle, this time against the Philistines, Saul's anxiety and insecurity led him to consult a fortune-teller woman to communicate with Samuel's spirit because Saul needed his advice. The Bible persistently preserves Samuel's image as the rebuking angry prophet, who without much compassion predicts Saul's ensuing tragic fall: "tomorrow, you and your sons will be with me."

The story of King Saul and his relations with Samuel is as tragic as telling one. From the first moment of their meeting Saul was cynically manipulated by the experienced and powerful
prophet, serving as an instrument to satisfy the people while in fact used to preserve the prophet's full leverage over the young, inexperienced and naive king. It also reveals the anomaly of mixing religious authority with politics, even though from time immemorial kings tended to legitimize their right to rule by suggesting that they were chosen by God and by seeking the priest's blessing and legitimacy. Yet such kings could only survive and function authoritatively as long as they had either inaugurated themselves as the leading figures of a church or faith, or subordinated the clergy to be at their service, turning it into a state mechanism for establishing their rule and legitimating his decisions.

In both cases the king, or the political leader, had to be extremely strong in order to keep the religious establishment under control or at distance from having a critical impact on public opinion. Obviously, the ideal option would be a total separation of state and religion. Yet to overlook the power of religious institutions and leaders through their direct contact with, and often more authentic representation of the masses, would be a gross mistake.